

A critic reflect on digital public archaeology

Gabriel Moshenska

UCL Institute of Archaeology

g.moshenska@ucl.ac.uk

Chiara Bonacchi

UCL Institute of Archaeology

c.bonacchi@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Keywords

Our aim in this brief comment paper is to examine some trends and developments in digital public archaeology in the UK in the context of emerging and established ideas around the uses, potential and limitations of digital media. Given that this is intended as a critique we reserve the right to raise more questions than we answer. The first question we want to consider is deceptively straightforward:

Where does digital public archaeology sit within the field of public archaeology more generally?

To even begin to answer this question we need to address the many and very disparate meanings of the phrase ‘public archaeology’ across academic, amateur and professional archaeology; between US, UK and other national scholarly traditions; across both scholarship and practice; and between authoritarian, libertarian, democratic, socialist, communitarian and other political directions.

Figure 1 represents a preliminary effort by co-author Moshenska to chart the main distinct strands within the practice of public archaeology, several of which have clear connections to current work in digital public archaeology. These are referred to in the text with regard to the numbered parts of the chart. In focusing on different aspects of this growing field we can shine a light on specific initiatives in digital public archaeology in context.

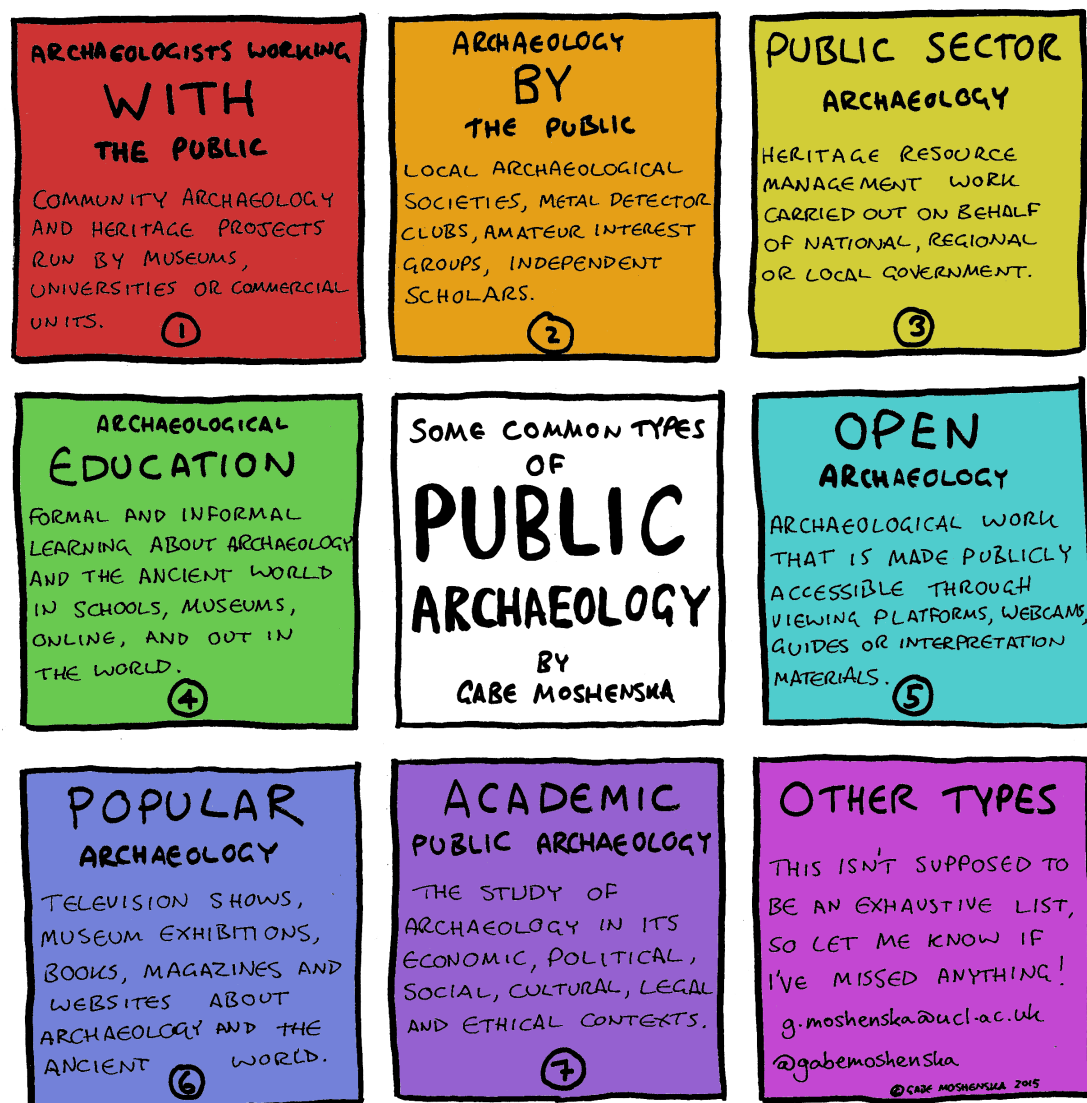


Figure 1: Some common types of public archaeology. Gabriel Moshenska 2015

Type 1: Archaeologists working with the public is the most common form of top-down community archaeology project often funded by external bodies and usually delivered by a team of archaeologists based in a museum, private company, or university. The primary source of funding for work of this kind in the UK is the Heritage Lottery Fund, and their changing priorities with regard to the creation and use of digital resources have had a significant and largely positive impact on the shape of digital public archaeology in the UK (Bewley and Maeer 2014).

A good example of a project of this kind is the Thames Discovery Programme, a long-term community initiative working with volunteers to record, monitor and study archaeological heritage along the foreshore of the River Thames (Cohen et al. 2012). From the outset the project used a range of online resources included blogs, a regularly updated website, and assorted social media platforms for photo and video sharing. One of the aims of the Programme was the formation of independent local groups that would continue their work beyond the lifetime of the funded project, in part through the use of digital means such as the training materials and the 'Riverpedia' hosted on a dedicated website (Cohen 2013).

To briefly consider **Type 2: Archaeology by the public** we are interested not only in the adoption of digital resources by grassroots community archaeology and heritage groups, but also the ways in which they have been leveraged by non-geographical grassroots communities. One good example of this is the long-term and extensive use of web fora by the metal detecting community, most notably the huge and very active UK Detector Net Forum (Redmayne and Woodward 2013). Another good case is the Megalithic Portal discussed below.

Type 5: Open archaeology focuses on the practice of making the various information, tools and processes of archaeological research visible and accessible to the public, and this is one area where digital technologies have a great deal to offer. Webcams have been joining or taking the place of viewing platforms on excavations since the mid-1990s, and have a particular value for urban excavations with substantial public interest but limited public access

(Boast and Biehl 2011). More recently we've seen the rise of location-based mobile applications ('apps') such as the Museum of London's popular and award-winning *Streetmuseum*, an augmented reality app series that overlays images from the Museum's collections onto locations around London when viewed through a Smartphone camera (Jeater 2012).

One of the best models of digital public archaeology in a developer-funded project is the Prescott Street dig carried out by LP Archaeology, who have consistently pioneered archaeological digital technologies. The dig took place in London in 2008 and the website provided project videos, constantly updated photo streams, and online access to the excavated materials as they emerged through LP's Archaeological Recording Kit or ARK, designed for the purpose of collecting and disseminating excavation data (Hunt et al. 2008; Morgan and Eve 2012). In addition, LP Archaeology developed a range of interpretive materials for teaching and learning, all available from the website (Richardson 2008). This probably remains the most successful application of digital public archaeology in a rescue context.

Some public archaeology projects cut across several of the categories, for example DigVentures, a social enterprise in the UK that bridges community, CRM and research-driven archaeology and heritage consultancy (DigVentures 2015). As well as **Types 1** and **5** this includes **Type 4: Archaeological education** and **Type 6: Popular archaeology**. DigVentures employs a variety of digital media to promote itself, to fundraise and to communicate with its supporters and with the wider world. It chose a Kickstarter-type model with a sliding scale of participation rewards, blurring the lines between old-fashioned patronage or sponsorship of excavations, modern crowd-funding, and the longstanding field-school pay-to-dig model (Bagwell et al. 2015; Bonacchi et al. in press). The DigVentures website is markedly more appealing than many other archaeological websites: amongst other things their blog resembles an archaeological BuzzFeed with topical click-bait articles rather than the more usual dig blog.

The most significant innovation from DigVentures and LP Archaeology is the Digital Dig Team, a web-based content and community management system for excavations that uses Wordpress software and builds on LP Archaeology's Archaeological Recording Kit discussed above (Wilkins and Westcott Wilkins 2014). We are particularly interested in the idea of making more immediate connections between excavation data and public archaeology, and the implications for openness and collaborative creation.

To wrap up part one, who does digital public archaeology in the UK? In our view some museums, a few commercial archaeology units and social enterprises do it well, creating innovative and often long-lasting resources and projects with strong popular interest. While there are plenty of good ideas around digital public archaeology in current academic research in the UK, generally there seems to be surprisingly little innovation in practice – although that's definitely starting to change.

How could digital public archaeologists think about communication?

New digital media, broadly defined as enabling forms of communications that are digital, interactive, hypertextual, networked, simulated, ubiquitous and de-located (see also Bonacchi 2012), have reshaped our everyday lives and the ways we interact with cultural content and institutions. Although as we have shown there is a growing understanding and adoption of these media in the archaeological sector, it seems that some archaeologists have started to dedicate attention to digital engagement without considering what it means to communicate in the first place, whether online or offline, in digital or analogue form.

In the literature of digital public archaeology it is not uncommon to find words like dissemination, engagement, participation and meaning-making used interchangeably or with little thought given to their deep and distinct theoretical and practical underpinnings. It is then worth briefly examining two distinct views of communication that have been codified in relation to mass

communication (Steinberg 2007: 39-40), and whose applicability is still being variously reviewed in digitally connected contexts (e.g. Jensen and Neuman 2013).

The first is the media- or technology-centred view, which arose immediately after the Second World War in North America (McQuail 2005: 62-63; Oosthuizen 1995: 3-5; Steinberg 2007: 39). It developed from the assumption that communication works towards integration, continuity and the ordering of society. This view embraced a mathematical-engineering approach borrowed from information studies, mainly concerned with accurate and efficient communication as the result of technically well-operating channels, and exemplified in the works of Lasswell (1948), and Shannon and Weaver (1949). Building on their work, the dominant paradigm began to take shape around the idea of the transmission of messages, of senders and receivers encoding and decoding such messages, and of media effects manifesting themselves in similar ways regardless of the characteristics of the people involved in the communication process (Fiske 2002: 30-31). It is worryingly easy to find evidence of this kind of supposedly straightforward and more or less blind 'transmission' or 'dissemination' of archaeological messages within digital public archaeology.

An alternative paradigm originated from a critique of this earlier dominant one, and is grounded in the work of the Frankfurt School, although it was only clearly outlined from the 1960s and 70s onwards (McQuail 2005: 65-66). This view does not share the notion of fixed meanings embedded in media content: on the contrary, it conceives of meanings as being constructed within the contexts of communication and varying according to the profile of the participants: their motivations, attitudes, prior knowledge, existing skills and socio-demographic characteristics.

Whether one chooses to embrace a media- or, alternatively, a meaning-centred view of communication has a considerable influence on the kinds of engagement that can result. What we have seen to date is too much of the former, with

limited attention to audiences and little or no interest in monitoring and, evaluation, and not enough of the latter with clear objectives and assessment of the results achieved.

How have digital media affected patterns of production and consumption of archaeological knowledge, and what has been lost (or not) in the rush to innovate?

These questions arise out of an interest in the potential for new and emerging digital technologies to democratise the archaeological process through public-professional collaboration, placing not only the data but also the means of creating the data in the hands of anybody who is motivated enough to get involved. However it is important to proceed with caution, noting that transformations in the communication landscape do not tend to consist of the simple, progressive substitution of 'older' media forms, content and audiences with entirely new ones. Rather, media can be seen as organisms that interact with one another and the environment, in a dynamic system (Naughton 2006: 43, see also Bonacchi 2012). Anything introduced into this ecosystem has an impact on all media-organisms and how they relate to each other, so that wipe-out scenarios occur only rarely .

On this basis it is important to recognise who actually participates in digital public archaeology in the UK, to be very careful in how we regard digital novelties, and to be aware of the continuing relevance and appeal of many so-called 'older' and non-digital forms of communication, for a more inclusive public archaeology. We need a realistic and possibly dispiriting view of the actual levels of interest or demand for collaborative research undertakings, as well as an appreciation for the majority of people using digital resources to explore archaeology who are likely happy to remain less 'hands-on' consumers. Research in public archaeology, museum studies and digital humanities has consistently shown that there is still a tendency on the part of organisations to use social media as broadcasting channels, rather than platforms for exchange and discussion (e.g. Richardson 2013). On the other side, however, there remains an

expectation from many archaeological enthusiasts that they will be guided by cultural institutions when engaging with their collections, information and activities (see for example Cameron 2007 with respect to museum engagement more generally). The potentially social nature and functions of social media hardly ever breaks through this desire for structured forms of engagement. At the same time television remains the most popular way of accessing archaeological information for a diverse UK audience – diverse, not least and quite importantly, in terms of formal education attained (Bonacchi 2014). One possible contributing factor in this trend is that, even in the increasingly digital UK there remains a divide at the level of access to broadband, digital skills and literacy, with many communities still marginalised. The lack of socio-economic diversity within most aspects of archaeology can make these gaps harder to see.

Are patterns of knowledge production changing? Probably the most interesting exercises in democratic digital public archaeology can be seen in crowdsourcing projects such as the Megalithic Portal, a remarkably useable and longstanding online database. The value of the Megalithic Portal as a resource is a monument to carefully managed collaborative work over more than a decade, run by and for enthusiasts (Richardson 2014).

A possible perspective on the growing field of crowdsourcing in UK archaeology is comparing it to the on-going decline of traditional local archaeological societies (ref?), known to be often the bastions of the retired, white, middle class amateur archaeologists (see Thomas 2010 for a report on demographics within community archaeology groups). It is worth considering whether online volunteering groups with active discussion forums can increasingly fulfil the same intellectual and social needs as local societies have until now. Here again we can look forward to examining the longer-term legacies of, for example, the Thames Discovery Programme, the MicroPasts project and some of DigVentures' initiatives, to see whether digital engagement can create new, enduring and interconnected communities. Generally we believe that online groupings will tend to remain more fluid, but not at all for this reason necessarily less valuable.

Conclusion: ignorance is no longer an option

We finish with an observation about the importance of regarding evaluation as an intrinsic component of digital public archaeology, rather than either forgetting about it entirely or leaving it to the very end because of lack of time, resources or, as it happens sometimes, the knowledge and skills needed to undertake it.

New digital media are opening up new opportunities to assess the effectiveness of archaeological communications in relation to the stated aims and objectives of specific projects. The move from a uni-directional Web 1.0 to a more dramatically relational Web 2.0 has led to the generation of a data deluge. Aside from its impressive if not daunting quantity, this data is characterized by its richness, its fine-grained and relational nature and its flexibility. When we use web platforms for public archaeology we also collect information that can be extraordinarily useful in reviewing our work. Informed by relevant theory and mixed with small data methods offline, this data deluge may help us understand where we stand and how we can improve Digital Public Archaeologies in practice.

Digital practices are still finding their place within UK public archaeology, and there is an immediate need for more research focusing on monitoring and understanding impacts and sustainability, as well as more general critiques and reflections (e.g. Henson 2013; Walker 2014). But at the same time there are innovative projects taking place, some of them generating resources that are likely to be of wider and longer-term value. Most archaeology, like most traditional theatre, operates with an imaginary 'fourth wall' separating the performers from the audience. The most exciting thing about digital public archaeology is the extent to which it enables or might come to enable the breaking down of that fourth wall.

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